



# FACT SHEET

Wetlands # 1

Office of Technical and Customer Assistance / Spring 2000

## WETLANDS

### WHAT ARE WETLANDS?

Wetlands are not easy to describe. There are many official definitions of wetlands used by scientists and by government. These definitions generally say that wetlands are areas that are flooded or have water near or at the surface of the ground. Swamps, marshes and bogs are some of the most commonly known wetland types. In Rhode Island, lakes, ponds, rivers, and streams are also considered wetland. What can be confusing, is that land within 50 feet of swamps, marshes, bogs, and ponds, as well as land within 100 or 200 feet of rivers and streams are also regulated as wetland. These perimeter wetlands and riverbank wetlands may not be wet at all, but may be high and dry land. Floodplains are also regulated as wetlands in Rhode Island.

### WHY ARE WETLANDS IMPORTANT?

Wetlands perform functions and provide benefits that no other areas of the landscape can. Wetlands supply and purify our drinking water. Wetlands help control floods by temporarily storing rainwater and snowmelt. Wetlands provide us with recreational opportunities such as swimming, fishing, hiking, and birdwatching. Wetlands also provide critical habitat for wildlife. Many animals depend entirely on wetlands for their survival, while others depend on wetlands for feeding, nesting, resting, or breeding purposes.

Because wetlands play such an important role, Rhode Island, on July 16, 1971, passed a Freshwater Wetlands Act to protect the remaining wetlands. This Act gave the government the authority to preserve, protect and restore freshwater wetlands. The Federal government as well as many other states now have similar wetland protection laws.

### HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE WETLANDS ON MY PROPERTY?

It is not always easy to recognize wetlands. Wetlands such as ponds, rivers, and marshes that may have standing or flowing water are the easiest to identify. Other wetlands, which may never have surface water, are harder for the layperson to identify. Wetlands may be where you least expect them to be.

Generally, if water ponds or flows across your property or if there are areas on your property where your feet get wet, particularly in the spring, you may have wetlands. If areas of your property are dominated by common wetland trees and shrubs such as red maple, black gum, highbush blueberry, and sweet pepperbush, or by certain ferns or mosses, you may have wetland. If the soil underfoot seems soft, wet, and muddy, or if you dig a hole that fills up with water, you may suspect that you have wetlands.

There are two ways to determine whether you have freshwater wetlands on your property. You can hire a private wetland scientist to examine your land and give you a written opinion or you can submit a request to DEM to visit your property and make an official determination.

### WILL DEM VISIT MY PROPERTY AND TELL ME IF I HAVE WETLANDS?

DEM will not visit your property without an application from you as the property owner. There are two application types you can prepare to obtain an official wetland determination from DEM. 1) If you are unsure whether you have wetland on your property, you can file a *Request to Determine the Presence of Wetlands* application with DEM. You can prepare this application yourself; you should not need to hire a private wetland scientist for this application type. In response to your application, DEM will determine the general location and type of wetlands on your property. 2) If you suspect or know you have wetlands on your property and want to verify their specific location you can file a *Request to Verify the Delineated Edge of Wetlands* application with DEM. You

would hire a private wetland scientist to flag the edges of the wetland for you, and a land surveyor or engineer would survey the flags and illustrate them on a plan of your property. In response, DEM will verify the exact edges of your wetlands.

It is possible that DEM may have already visited your property and determined where wetlands are and/or verified the edges of the wetlands in response to an application filed by a prior owner of the property. DEM can check the computer list of old applications for you to determine if there is already a file about your property.

### **WHAT CAN WE DO TO PROTECT OUR WETLANDS?**

There are many things we can do in our communities to help protect our wetlands. We can read about wetlands and learn more about why they are so important. We can maintain undisturbed buffers of vegetation between wetlands and activities. We can work with our towns and encourage developers to seek upland areas rather than wetlands for project sites. If wetlands can't be avoided altogether, we can help to make sure development impacts have been minimized. We can aid in restoring damaged or lost wetlands, and we can support local restoration programs. Both local and state governments need your support with wetland protection programs.

If we make an effort to preserve, protect and restore our wetlands, they will not only continue to provide for us and for wildlife, but we will be able to enjoy them and all the recreational opportunities and values that they provide.

### **HOW CAN I OBTAIN A COPY OF DEM'S WETLAND REGULATIONS?**

A complete copy of DEM's *Rules and Regulations Governing the Administration and Enforcement of the Freshwater Wetlands Act* can be obtained from DEM's Office of Technical and Customer Assistance located at the Foundry Office Complex at 235 Promenade Street, Providence (401 222-6800). You may also find this information on the DEM website at <http://www.state.ri.us/dem>.

Disclaimer: This Fact Sheet is for general information purposes only and is not meant to be used as a substitute for the Freshwater Wetlands Act or the *Rules and Regulations Governing the Administration and Enforcement of the Freshwater Wetlands Act*.